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Clark's departure upsets conservatives' strategy

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WASHINGTON — The decision of William P. Clark, a friend and adviser of President Reagan for nearly two decades, to resign as Interior secretary upsets the plan of conservatives to give Mr. Reagan's second term a more ideological tilt.

Mr. Clark, 53, who replaced the controversial James G. Watt at the Interior Department in 1983, informed the president Monday that he intends to leave the cabinet and return to California by early spring. "I've been here for four years now and I want to get back to the family," he said yesterday on ABC-TV.

His departure is a stiff blow to conservatives in the administration, who supported Mr. Clark as the successor to James A. Baker III as White House chief of staff. With Mr. Clark in that post, he would be able to install conservatives in key positions throughout the administration, they insisted.

But his return to California thwarts that plan, an administration official said. "Bill Clark was the capstone, and now he's gone," he said. By leaving the administration, Mr. Clark has all but taken himself out of consideration for chief of staff, the official added.

Backers of Mr. Clark — they include Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, CIA Director William J. Casey and some members of Mr. Reagan's "kitchen cabinet" of private advisers — were said to have brought up the matter of the chief of staff's post with the president weeks ago. While not ruling out Mr. Clark for the job, Mr. Reagan gave little encouragement, an official said.

The conservative supporters of Mr. Clark did not seek the removal of Mr. Baker, the leader of the pragmatist faction in the administration, a Clark associate said. Instead, they merely wanted assurance that Mr. Clark would replace him, should Mr. Baker leave.

Without such assurance, one official said, Mr. Clark might have been unwilling to remain in Washington as Interior secretary, a job that left him uninvolved in most of the major policy disputes in the administration.

As chief of staff, Mr. Clark would steer Mr. Reagan toward stronger conservative positions on both foreign and domestic policy and away from the more pragmatic, compromising stands favored by Mr. Baker, allies of Mr. Clark said.

One conservative leader said the Clark departure was "damaging" politically to "all the people who were trying to get Clark in," including Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Casey.

Another person who may be affected is Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, the ambassador to the United Nations. She has been bidding for a senior foreign policy post in Washington, but has made little headway. Supporters of Mr. Clark said she would get a high post, possibly White House counselor, if Mr. Clark were chief of staff.

The backing for Mr. Clark was widespread among conservatives. In a recent survey by *Conservative Digest* magazine, many of them said the appointment of Mr. Clark as White House chief of staff should be a top priority in Mr. Reagan's second term.

The setback was a bitter one for conservatives since they have suffered a number of defeats in Washington recently. Senator Robert J. Dole (R, Kan.), a pragmatist, was chosen as the new Senate majority leader, and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, also viewed as a pragmatist, has asserted greater control over foreign policy.

The Interior post was Mr. Clark's third in the Reagan administration. He came to Washington as deputy secretary of state, then switched to national security adviser.

When Mr. Clark agreed in 1983 to

succeed Mr. Watt, who had resigned during a furor over a joke he made about minorities and handicapped people, it set off a power struggle in the administration.

Mr. Reagan at one point approved the appointment of Mr. Baker as national security adviser and Michael K. Deaver, a White House official, as chief of staff. But pressure from Mr. Clark, Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Casey succeeded in getting Mr. Reagan to change his mind and drop that plan.

At Interior, Mr. Clark got a mixed reaction from environmental

groups. Most said he was better from their perspective than Mr. Watt, but some contended that he merely made the same policies less controversial.

"The way public lands have been administered is only marginally different from what it would have been under Watt," said John McComb, of the Sierra Club. "In fairness, he [Mr. Clark] quit tilting at windmills — oil leasing in wilderness areas, for example."

William Turnage, president of the Wilderness Society, spoke caustically of Mr. Clark's "public relations skills." These gave him the ability "to cover up the Watt disasters and keep the president's miserable environmental policies off the front page."

The Clark announcement apparently caught the administration without a ready successor. Among those mentioned as possible replacements are Energy Secretary Donald Hodel, Representative Richard Cheney (R, Wyo.) and Interior Undersecretary Anne Dore McLaughlin.